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ABSTRACT

Zoroastrianism, an ancient religion dating back to the Iranian Stone Age, is still practiced in areas of Iran and India. Following centuries of oppression under Muslim rule in Iran, the adherents are located today in remote areas and only recently have welcomed unbelievers into their fire temples to view the sacred fire (Atash Bahram) and the humble fires (Dadgah). The Zoroastricians believe in one God (Ahura Mazda), and their daily religious practices incorporate living a moral life and adhering to strict laws of purity. The religious calendar contains the seven holy festivals (gahambars), one to honor each of the Holy Immortals, and a multitude of family festivals financially supported by individual villagers. An important feature of Zoroastrianism is the rituals associated with death, considered the greatest source of impurity. The villagers who care for corpses are considered impure and are treated as if suffering from an infectious disease. The rituals associated with the festivals and death are described as they were witnessed at Sharifabad in Iran. The document concludes with a six item bibliography. (DJC)

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No. 7

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A LAST STRONGHOLD OF TRADITIONAL ZOROASTRIANISM

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Asian Studies Research Institute

TEACHING AIDS FOR THE STUDY OF INNER ASIA

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1977

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During the centuries after the coming of Islam, the Zoroastrians who held by their ancient faith gradually fell back on two strongholds in the heart of Iran, one of which was the oasis city of Yazd. Material progress in Iran in the 1970's has now linked Yazd to Tehran by road, rail and air, so that to travel there from the capital need be only a matter of hours; and it is difficult to realize how remote a place it was only a short while ago. Motor-vehicles first appeared in the area in any numbers after the 1939-45 war; and until then it could take as long as three exhausting and often dangerous weeks to get there by horse-carriage from Tehran. Even from any of the neighbouring cities, Kerman (the other Zoroastrian centre), Shiraz, or Isfahan, it was a journey of several days, and the roads were rough and plagued by robbers. So within living memory Yazd was a place, it has been said, 'insular beyond the insularity of islands,' cut off by deserts and mountains instead of by seas. The city is in a narrow plain, a little over 30 miles long, between two mountain ranges. The climate is harsh, with burning summers and bitterly cold winters; and since there is little rainfall the plain is mostly desert - in some places glittering white with salt, in others covered with sand. There are villages scattered over it, each with its patch of fields, irrigated either by wells or by water brought underground from distant mountain springs. The ground slopes gently down to the south-east corner, which being the lowest point has the best supplies

of water. And there stands the city of Yazd itself. Down the centuries its inhabitants have lived largely from the caravan trade, with goods brought up from the Persian Gulf on camels, and sent on, with Yazdi silk and cotton, to the cities of the north. The camel-drivers were themselves like sailors, coming home from their travels with strange tales of distant places, and of the dangers of the desert, to impress the stay-at-homes.

Yazd, like the other cities of Iran, must have been early seized and garrisoned by the Moslem conquerors in the 7th century A.D.; but the area around it can have had little attraction for Arab settlers, and probably the villages of the plain were long left more or less to themselves. Through the centuries Islam spread slowly but steadily among them. The rule of law applied only erratically to unbelievers, and those Zoroastrians who would not convert suffered greatly, and were ground down in time to extreme poverty. It was only in the second half of the 19th century that the efforts of their co-religionists in India, the Parsis, led to the worst of their burdens being lightened; but it was not until 1925 that they were granted almost full rights of citizenship.

At that time there were still over 30 Zoroastrian villages around Yazd, and a sizeable Zoroastrian population in the city itself. Life in the region had by then changed little in essentials since the Middle Ages, even for the Moslem majority; and since the Zoroastrians lived in an added isolation, they still kept to almost wholly traditional ways. These circumstances,

however hard on individuals, were ideal for preserving unchanged ancient beliefs and practices.

This fact remained unappreciated for a long time by Western scholars, partly because of a disastrous foray by the Dane, Westergaard, in the 1840's. This eminent philologist had travelled to Bombay in search of manuscripts of the Avesta (the Zoroastrian sacred book); and from there he returned on the same quest to Persia. He had been bitterly disappointed to find that the Parsis would not allow any non-Zoroastrian to enter their fire-temples or to visit their funerary towers - the 'towers of silence'; and the East India Company, which then administered Bombay, was very stern with any foreigners who tried to violate such sanctions. So he arrived in Yazd not only in search of manuscripts, but determined to see all that he wanted to. As he wrote to a friend in Bombay: 'Here there is no Honourable Company to watch with parental care over the religious feelings of the people.' He had introductions to the Moslem governor of Yazd, with whom he stayed; and he felt that he could rely on him for help if he stirred up trouble. So one day he mounted on horseback, and armed with sword and pistol rode into the Zoroastrian quarter of the town, resolved, it seems, to fight his way into a fire-temple if necessary. He was taken aback to be received with perfect courtesy and friendliness, and to be led without ado into one of the lesser fire-temples, where he was shown almost everything. He was not, however, notably grateful. This was a time of great poverty and oppression for the Iranis,

and their places of worship were necessarily very humble, with the simplest of vessels and furnishings, so as not to attract the cupidity of Moslem roughs. Moreover, the one things which the priests did not show Westergaard was the sacred fire itself. This they had become accustomed to keep hidden away in a tiny room, with a door no bigger than a cupboard's, so that anyone forcing his way into the temple would not be able to find and extinguish it. Westergaard hastily concluded, in view of the general humbleness of the building, that its guardians were neglectful and had let the sacred fire grow cold, and this deepened his contempt for them.

He seems to have parted from the priests with little courtesy; and he then rode off to the tower of silence, which is on a hill some distance from the town. There he used his sword to force out the boulder which filled the doorway, disturbed some recently exposed bodies, and tried to crack the skulls of skeletons with the butt of his riding whip. This was because Herodotus (III. 12) had reported of old that the Persians had very thin skulls, and Westergaard wanted to test the truth of his statement. In the clear air of Iran one can see for miles, and the Zoroastrians must have been fully aware of his riding out to their funerary tower; and the traces of how he behaved there would have been all too apparent later. After that outrage, they evidently put up their barriers of silence and reserve against him, as persecution had taught them so well how to do. His efforts to obtain manuscripts proved useless, and he rode

off in dudgeon to Kerman. But the Yazdis must have forewarned their coreligionists, and he was met with a similar blankness there. He reported wrathfully in a letter that the Yazdis 'stand far below, I will not say the Parsis, but below the lowest Hindus. Of their religion they know nothing whatsoever,' while of the Kermanis he wrote: 'They are greater brutes than their brethren in Yazd . . . They are by degrees becoming Musulmans; and it is at any rate a change for the better.' Most unfortunately, this letter was published, with Westergaard's permission, in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of London in 1843, and it served to confirm opinion in the West that persecution had reduced the Irani community to a point where nothing could be learnt from them of their ancient faith.

After this, Western scholars made only brief or incidental contact with the Irani Zoroastrians. An admirable German diplomat, Houtum-Schindler, serving as consul in Kerman; recorded all he could learn of the community there, but as an ethnographer rather than a student of religion. The Englishman Edward Browne, later professor of Persian in Cambridge, was the guest of Yazdi Zoroastrians for a couple of weeks in the 1890's, and he both showed and received great courtesy; but though his record of his visit contains much of interest, his own scholarly concern was with Islam and the Baha'is, and he was content with a brief stay. Some 15 years later Williams Jackson, professor of Iranian Studies at Columbia University, New York, spent about the same amount of time in the city of Yazd. His scholarly interest was with

Zoroastrianism, but he arrived in Persia with the conviction that the living community had little to offer, and he intended to study monuments and the glorious past of the faith. He had accordingly a fixed plan for his stay in Iran, and this did not allow long in Yazd. Nevertheless he learnt enough during his short time there to make him think that there might be customs and observances preserved by the Irani Zoroastrians which the Parsis had given up on migrating to India.

When about half a century later I followed in the wake of this distinguished scholar, I had no clearly defined plans, but only a hope of being able somewhere and somehow to learn more of what living Zoroastrianism meant to its orthodox adherents. In Tehran, where the greatest number of the Irani community now live, I was met with great kindness, and also encountered the first obstacles to my pursuit. Since air-travel became common, the leading Tehrani Zoroastrians (some of whom are immensely rich) have been in close contact with Parsi reformists, and have themselves become full of progressive ideas; and they naturally deprecate the traditionalism of the old communities, and actively discouraged me from going south to Yazd, a place, they said, of wind and dust and ignorance.

Nevertheless, when I persisted, I was generously given letters of introduction to the Yazdi community. There I encountered the age-old habit of reserve, engrained in the Zoroastrians as a defence against their persecutors. This was especially strong, it seemed, in the citizens of Yazd itself, who had

probably suffered most from the town mob, and the zeal of the Moslem authorities; and it was re-inforced, among the leaders of their community, by a new uncertainty, for they were susceptible to the constant barrage of criticism and exhortation from the reformists of Bombay and Tehran, who kept urging them to abandon many old beliefs and ways, and so they had become uneasy about expounding their faith, being unsure what was the true tradition.

Among the Zoroastrian villagers, however, one entered into another world. Wealth had not reached them, and they were still engaged for the most part in a hard struggle against drought and the menace of engulfing sands; and without leisure for speculation, they held to their ancestral religion as their chief source of strength and happiness, and harboured no doubts about it. An inquiring stranger they welcomed with traditional warmth and courtesy; and, regarding a non-Moslem as more or less an honorary Zoroastrian, they allowed even such a one to join in their worship and observances without reserve, provided only that the basic laws of purity were kept.

Each of the Yazdi villages had its own beauty and interest; and in each the people were kind and helpful, and ready to answer any questions about their faith which they could; but regularly it was said that the one place really to learn of Zoroastrian orthodoxy was the village of Sharifabad. This was the furthest of the Zoroastrian villages from Yazd, at the northern end of the plain; and an opportunity came to visit it when I was

invited to a celebration of the ancient feast of Mihragan in a village only a few miles away. At the end of the week-long festival my host needed to go to Sharifabad, and suggested that I should accompany him. On our arrival, we went to the house of the kadkhoda or village mayor, Rustam Belivani, where we were made warmly welcome. He and his wife and I became friends, and soon afterwards I returned, by their invitation, to live as a member of their household for the next seven months.

The other Zoroastrian villages had provided much fascinating material, but it was at Sharifabad that one was most conscious of stepping back into an ordered world of ancient religious certainties, untroubled by any advances in human thought since the 7th century A.D. The depth of the village piety was impressive, and one of the most striking outer signs of it were the fire-temples. Every old Zoroastrian village had its own place of worship, a consecrated bilding in which a sacred fire was kept always burning; but all the other village fires were of the third or humblest grade, Dādgāh fires, the equivalent of small parish churches; whereas Sharifabad had not one but two Ātash Bahrāms, that is, fires of the highest rank, the equivalent of great cathedrals. The dignity of a sacred fire is inherent in the fire itself, and the rites of its consecration and service; and during the years of oppression these two great fires had of necessity been housed in tiny mud-brick buildings, indistinguishable from ordinary village dwellings. But in this century the villagers had built for them dignified stone edifices, whose

domes rose above the level of the other roofs.

The Sharifabadis knew nothing of the history of their fires, beyond the fact that they were very, very old. One, which they regarded as the greater, they called simply the Ātash Bahrām. The other had a specific name, Ādhor Kharā. They also knew that the neighbouring village of Turkabad (forcibly converted to Islam in the mid-19th century) had once been famous as a dwelling place of priests; and fortunately historical sources (though sparse) and the colophons of Avestan and Pahlavi manuscripts, make it possible to interpret these facts, and so to explain the astonishing orthodoxy of Sharifabad. For it emerges that from them the tiny village of Turkabad was long the abode of the high priest of the Zoroastrians of Iran, the head of the whole religious community there. His predecessors had remained personages of some power and influence down to the 10th century A.D. - some 400 years after the Arab conquest; but thereafter persecution evidently drove them to seek refuge in this remote place. And there they remained, with their college of priests, down to the early 18th century, when they moved, probably under pressure from the Moslem authorities, to the city of Yazd itself.

It was presumably when the first high priest came to Turkabad that other priests brought the two great fires to neighbouring Sharifabad. Ādhor Kharā is a dialect form of Ādur Farnbāg, which was the name of one of the three greatest sacred fires of ancient Iran. Its temple was in Persia proper, the modern province of Fars; and when the Arabs arrived there, its priests

are reported to have divided its embers, making two fires, in a desperate attempt to ensure that it was not extinguished. And evidently, in the end, one of these two fires was brought to Sharifabad. And since the villagers held their other sacred fire in even greater reverence, it seems almost certain that this was the sacred fire from Istakhr, the capital of the Sasanian kings, which had been under the special care of the high priests. Both these fires are known to have been consecrated already in the Parthian period, so they have probably been burning continually since before the birth of Christ.

Manuscript-colophons show that some of the oldest Avestan and Pahlavi manuscripts in existence were written by priests in Sharifabad and Turkabad; and the sojourn among them of learned priests for probably over 500 years, and the continuing presence of the great fires, evidently lies at the root of Sharifabadi orthodoxy. In Zoroastrianism, orthodoxy is closely linked with orthopraxy, belief with observance; and so the villagers, once they had been well-instructed by the priests, were able to support their faith by a continuing and ordered pattern of devotional life.

There are a number of leading Zoroastrian doctrines which are common to that religion and to Christianity and Islam; but Zoroastrianism has yet other doctrines which are unique to it, and which, partly because of their uniqueness, have proved difficult for the West to grasp. Thus Zoroaster, living, it seems, in the late Iranian Stone Age, inherited an archaic concept of

the world as having been made in seven stages (a concept not unlike that of the Hebrew Genesis). These stages culminated, it was held, in the creation of man (made in the image of God) and fire, which formed as it were the life-force of the world. Zoroaster spiritualised this ancient cosmogony by linking the seven creations with seven divine beings, the 'Holy Immortals'. At their head was Ahura Mazdā, God and Creator; and around him, and evoked by him, were six lesser divinities, who hypostatize virtues or desirable states. In the secondary Zoroastrian literature it is clearly said that each of these seven great Beings guards one of the seven creations; and that man can worship them both by offering them his direct veneration, and by caring for their creations. Then they will protect him, and will also imbue him with the virtues which they themselves embody.

This doctrine is so remote from any religious teachings familiar to the West that generations of scholars either ignored it, or treated it as a piece of medieval scholasticism, without bearing on the religious lives of ordinary men. So this was an article of faith which I did not expect to hear spoken of in 20th century Sharifabad; and I was startled when an elderly farmer, waiting beside me for a service to begin, explained matter-of-factly that each of the Holy Immortals was represented there by some object belonging to his own special creation, that is, earth and water, plants and animals, metal and fire, up to man himself in the person of the celebrating priest. So as each object was blessed during the service, the world would be strength-

ened, and the Holy Immortals themselves would come to bless their worshippers.

My neighbour told me all this as a simple article of faith; and it was plain that for him and the other Sharifabadis the ritual of the many religious services, with the visible representation there of the invisible divinities, was a constant reminder of this fundamental doctrine, and I gradually learned that this doctrine, far from being a matter only for long-dead theologians, actually dominated the villagers' daily lives, and gave them a sense of divinity being present all around them. And this made them reverent in their dealing with the physical world. Thus they were scrupulous in their care not to pollute water, earth or fire, because these creations were under the protection of the divinities of Health, Devotion, and Righteousness; it is put vividly in one of the Pahlavi books that the divinity of Devotion suffers when anything unclean is buried in the earth, as a man would do if a scorpion had crept under his shirt to sting him; and the other guardians of the creations could be equally afflicted by mankind's pollutions. So it greatly distressed the Zoroastrians when their Moslem neighbours, following their own customs, washed their dead in running streams, threw out putrefying matter on the earth, or used fire to burn up rubbish. The Zoroastrians themselves always drew small quantities of water for washing anything which they held to be impure; and any unclean waste-matter they either carried away to lay on stony ground in the desert, or dropped into a small square building without

window or doors, at the edge of the village fields, where it was destroyed periodically by acid.

The villagers showed equal care for the living creations. Plants were under the protection of the divinity of Long Life, or Immortality; and so they tended growing crops with great skill, and would never wantonly cut down a bush or tree. Nor would they ever kill a lamb or calf, for all beneficient creatures belonged to the divinity of Good Purpose, and so they held that each must be allowed to grow to maturity and contribute its own small part to the life of the world. They were uniformly kind to their animals and fed them well, and I never saw even the most stubborn donkey being beaten or misused - a striking fact in the Middle East. But the richest implications of the doctrine of the seven creations and their guardian divinities arose from the concept that man himself is especially the creation of God. As such, he must not only be zealous in his protection of the six lesser creations, but must make his own moral and spiritual being his prime care - as well as his body, for to Zoroastrians a strong and healthy body is part of the good life, since the body, no less than the soul, has been made by God. Physical enjoyment, in so far as it is compatible with moral good, is therefore positively encouraged in Zoroastrianism, since it is part of man's service to God to enjoy this world of his creation as fully as possible. They never fast, therefore, and strongly disapprove of celibacy - there were no unmarried people in Sharifabad.

Further, according to Zoroastrian doctrine the individual must not only strive to live the good life himself, but must help his fellow-men to do so, since they too are the creation of God. Kindness and small acts of charity abounded even among the poorest of the villagers, and the community was famed for honesty. As Agha Rustam put it to me, they and their forbears had given up so much for their religion - every chance of prosperity and worldly advantage - and if they had then failed to live up to its moral and spiritual demands, the whole sacrifice would have been in vain. Tales were told even by Moslems of the striking honesty of the Zoroastrians (which some interpreted as mere foolish simplicity); and there was a Yazdi proverb that one should eat at a Jew's house but sleep at a Zoroastrian's; and this was explained as meaning that a Jew would be rich enough to keep a good table, and that one could trust a Zoroastrian in all things, even when one was asleep and helpless.

The doctrine of the seven creations and their divine guardians thus provided the Sharifabadis with a code for living, and brought a spiritual element into the most ordinary actions of daily life.

The doctrine also supported the framework for the devotional year. The Zoroastrians have seven holy days of obligation - festivals, that is, which it is a sin to neglect - and the Pahlavi books explain clearly that these holy days are in honour of the seven creations - and so, by implication, of their divine guardians, but once more Western scholars, who have been little

concerned with Zoroastrian observance, dismissed this connection as something late and artificial. So again I was taken aback to find that these festivals did in fact shape the year for the Sharifabadis, and helped to sustain the community in many ways.

Six of the festivals, called the gahāmbārs, formed a uniform chain, stretching through the year from late spring onwards. Each lasted five days; but 30 festival days were not excessive, since the Zoroastrian calendar does not recognize the week or have any fixed recurrent holiday. In Yazd and the suburban villages, the observance of the festivals had been weakened by the need to fit in with the Friday holiday of the Moslems, and to work on Zoroastrian holy days. Sharifabad was, however, a farming village, able to subsist from its own crops of corn and cotton; and it had its own small schools, so that in the main the villagers could still follow their own religious calendar. On the gahāmbār days, therefore, they did only essential work, such as looking after animals or irrigating crops. The women stopped their daily spinning and weaving, and the children joyfully abandoned their usual chores. The chief focus of each festival was on the houses which had endowed observances. To keep the gahāmbārs is highly meritorious, and weighs with one's good deeds in the scales of justice hereafter; and so it was, it seems an old custom for people to endow their celebration. This custom received an impetus after the coming of Islam, for the following reason: a law was passed whereby if any member of a family became a Moslem, then on his father's death he inherited all the

family property, to the exclusion of his Zoroastrian brethren. But by one of the vagaries of human nature, such as make the survival of minorities possible, the Moslem authorities in Yazd recognized and upheld charitable bequests, even if made by Zoroastrians, if these were duly registered with them. So to safeguard themselves, the Zoroastrians became accustomed to leave what property they had in trust for the celebration of gahāmbārs. The testator would nominate a son or sons to the trusteeship, and this meant that his descendants could continue to work the fields, or live in the family house, but had to set aside a part of the crops, or a fixed sum as if in rent, to pay for the annual observance. It was said that one could estimate the relative date of a Zoroastrian village by the number of endowed gahāmbārs. Some new villages, developed only this century with the discovery of fresh springs of water, had only one or two; but in Sharifabad there was not a single day out of the thirty which was not studded with them, and those who wished to found a new observance (as was done even while I was in the village) were hard put to it to find a space.

Everyone in a family was involved in their own celebration, and relatives would come from other villages too to share in it. The chief work of preparation fell on the women, who turned it all into part of the pleasures of the feast. (Gaiety is a marked feature of Zoroastrian holy days, because they think that merriment pleases the divine beings, whereas sorrow, like anger and quarrelling, drives them away.) The essential rites of a gahāmbār

are religious services solemnized in honour of Ahura Mazdā himself, the Creator of all; and the blessing of food at these services, which is then eaten communally by all who attend them - and it is a merit to attend as well as to give a gahāmbār. At the simplest celebration the food consisted of lurk - that is, seven kinds (the number seven runs through the celebration of the seven feasts) of dried fruits and nuts, such as in the days of poverty could be grown in the fields, or gathered in the hills. If the endowment were larger, there would be freshly-baked bread also; and from the richest endowments an animal - a sheep or goat - would be solemnly sacrificed and the meat blessed and distributed. In the days of persecution these festivals were usually the only times in the year when the villagers ate meat; and they still in the 1960's held it a sin to kill an animal except sacrificially, for thus, they believed, they destroyed only the creature's body, and its consecrated spirit could live on.

The baking of bread gave the most work, for there must be enough to satisfy all comers; and it must be fresh, and baked with espeically pure leaven, for only what is fresh and pure may be consecrated. So the baking was done during the night before the feast, and the women would invite friends and relatives to help. They usually began soon after midnight, and in the summer, when most people slept on the flat roofs, they would call across them to waken one another. The winding lanes - some of them just wide enough for a donkey with panniers - were very dark, unless there was a moon, and so the house-kitchen seemed very bright

and welcoming - and very warm, for like all other rooms it had no windows, only a chimney-opening for the wood-smoke to escape by. The dough had been mixed earlier, and the women made teams to shape it into small flat rounds. These were baked by clapping them against the inside walls of the hot earthen oven with open top; and it needed skill to snatch them off again just as they were done, and before one dropped into the fire below - which would be not only a waste but a sin for a Zoroastrian, as a pollution of the fire. The baked bread was piled up in wicker baskets, woven from pomegranate twigs; and while the work went on, girls would enliven the proceedings by singing and playing the arabun - a big tambourine. When the last bit of dough was baked, if there had been a sacrifice the whole carcass was hung ceremonially in the hot oven to roast. Then a clean cloth would be spread on the floor, and all the helpers would gather round to drink tea and eat some of the new bread, with goat's cheese and whatever herbs might be in season. The master of the house would preside over this meal, and would thank all who had come to help - for the villagers showed unfailing courtesy towards one another, following established forms; and there would be talk then of the founder of the gahāmbār feast, with blessings called down on him and his ancestors.

Sometimes the gathering broke up only just before dawn, leaving the women of the house with no time for sleep, for they would begin at once to sweep and tidy to have all ready by sunrise on the holy day. Such activities would go on in every

house in the village which had an endowed gahāmbār on a particular day - sometimes 20 or 30 of them; and the priest would then go to one after another to celebrate the religious services, through the morning and afternoon. In preparation for his coming a carpet would be spread in one of the open porticos that flanked the small central yard and the proper vessels would be set on this, together with the food to be blessed. The priest's arrival was always heralded by a scamper of small boys, who pressed into the courtyard without ceremony; and their appearance alerted the master of the house, who would take his place at the door to greet his adult guests. The priest, dressed all in white, would be accompanied by the ātashband - the man who looked after the sacred fire - and he would be carrying a metal vase with live fire in it, for no Zoroastrian rite is ever celebrated without fire being present, for Zoroaster enjoined on his followers always to pray with their eyes on fire, the creation and symbol of Righteousness. These two men would be escorted by a grave group of village elders, often also dressed in white, that is, in clothes of undyed, home-spun cotton. This was the clothing which Moslems forced the Zoroastrians to wear for centuries, to set them apart; and so they have come to take a pride in it, especially as white is for Zoroastrians the colour of purity. After them would come the younger men, usually in darker garments, and then a group of matrons, in lovely brightly-coloured traditional clothes, predominantly green and red, and with them some little girls. By village etiquette

young wives and marriageable girls only attended gahāmbārs at the houses of their own relatives; and never walked in procession; but apart from this point of etiquette, everyone in the whole village, or from beyond, was welcome to attend a gahāmbār. No invitations were sent out, therefore, but it was the custom to splash fresh whitewash round the mud-brick of the outer doorway, to let everyone know that the festival was being celebrated there that day. Undoubtedly one of Zoroaster's purposes in founding the seven feasts (the tradition says that it was he who did so) was to further a sense of brotherhood in his community. All quarrels, it is enjoined, are to be made up then; and the holy days are celebrated with the sort of warmth and loving kindness that we associate with Christmas.

Each man on arrival in the house would say the koshti prayers - that is, he would untie the koshti or sacred cord which every orthodox Zoroastrian wears round his waist, and standing facing the sun, the heavenly fire, he would say the appropriate prayers while retying it. 'Making new the koshti' is an obligatory preliminary to every religious service; and since the short accompanying prayers are addressed to Ahura Mazdā, and include a denunciation of the Devil, their frequent repetition is both a discipline and another steady reminder of basic doctrine.

Each man would then sit down, usually knee to knee with his fellows in the open yard, while the priest took his seat, cross-legged, on the carpet, with the village elders, in order of precedence, beside him. The ātashband, who had set the metal

fire-vase on the carpet, took up his position standing to face the congregation. The priest then began his service of blessing and thanksgiving, conducted in the ancient Avestan language, whose words were as uncomprehensible but familiar to the congregation as the Latin mass to the uneducated Catholic. At two points in the service there were occasions for general responses, and these were signalled with uplifted hand by the ātashband, and were made sonorously. There was a great feeling throughout the service (which lasted some 20 minutes) of reverence for the actual presence of the divine. At the end the ātashband carried the fire-vase round the whole congregation, and each man stretched out his hand and drew the smoke towards him with a murmured invocation. Then two or three laymen tied big cloths of striped cotton round their waists and filled these with the lurk, bread and meat, which they distributed to everyone present. Some of this food was always eaten on the spot, some wrapped in clean napkins to be carried home for those who could not be present.

This ended the essential gahāmbār observance, and the host then stood at the door again to bid his guests farewell. Sometimes there would be two or three Moslem beggars waiting outside - usually bent old women wrapped in black veils - and they would be heartily welcomed and given some unconsecrated food straight from the kitchen. In some Zoroastrian villages food was not given in charity to Moslems, on the grounds that this was merely to sustain the wicked; but the Sharifabads always tried to give to the needy, even from among their oppressors.

Usually the gahāmbār service was followed by smaller gatherings of family and friends; and at these wine would be drunk to the memory of the founder of the gahāmbār, and there would often be singing, and dancing by men, and story telling. (Girls danced, often very gracefully, when by themselves, but never in company.)

The six gahāmbārs are celebrated uniformly; and the seventh holy day follows close upon the sixth one. This festival is unique, because it is held on New Year's Day, Nō Rūz, which traditionally coincided with the spring equinox, on March 21st. So it both completes the chain of seven feasts, thus looking backward, and ushers in the new year; and this is doctrinally significant. For this feast, in honour of fire, the symbol of righteousness, is celebrated as an annual reminder that in the end righteousness will triumph over evil, and that this will be the beginning of life everlasting. Zoroaster evidently saw in the annual resurgence of life in spring a promise of the future resurrection of the body, and the kingdom of God to come upon earth; and so the feast shares some observances with Christian Easter, with symbols of renewal such as spring flowers, new clothes and gaily-painted eggs. The feast had this further significance in Zoroaster's dualistic picture of the world, that it marked the end of winter, which is seen as belonging to the Hostile Spirit, who seeks then to kill all living things with his weapons of cold and darkness; and it brings in summer, the good season, and so marks an annual victory for the forces of good.

It is thus in every way a most joyful feast.

Unfortunately, by a disastrous calendar reform in the third century A.D., the Zoroastrians adopted from Egypt a 365-day calendar, which slips steadily back through the seasons; so that in time Nō Rūz became divorced from its proper time of year season, and lost support from nature for its doctrinal significance. The spring festival was so beloved, however, that it was still kept as a secular Nō Rūz, and this is why Moslem Iran was able to retain this one Zoroastrian feast. Nō Rūz is accordingly still celebrated as the greatest yearly holiday in Iran, and by Shi'i Moslems everywhere; and the Moslems moreover then set out (without knowing the reason why) a table with seven symbolic objects on it, thus still honouring unconsciously Zoroaster's teachings about the seven Holy Immortals.

The Sharifabadis kept Nō Rūz with the rest of Iran as a secular feast in the spring; but they also kept the duplicate religious feast at the time of year which it had then reached through recession, that is, in late July. This was still the holiest single day in the year for them. There are no flowers then, in the burning heat of a Yazdi summer; but they used sprays of evergreen instead, to celebrate this festival of life. Usually in all their holy days they blessed the dead, whom they hoped were invisibly present, with the words 'May God have mercy on them!' But at this seventh feast they said instead 'May they live!' zande bāshand, which was both a blessing on living men, and a hope that at the last day all the living and the dead would

find eternal life.

On the morning of the holy day every household in the village sent a bowl of fruits, eggs and newly-baked bread to the priest's house, together with a list bearing the names of every living member of the family over the age of nine. And the priest then celebrated the Visperad, the especially solemn religious service evolved for the gahāmbārs and Nō Rūz. In the distant past he would have had seven assistants at this service, which lasts between four and five hours. The bowls of family offerings were spread all around him to be blessed; and during the service he consecrated the parahaoma, a drink made from the crushed stems of the haoma plant, the Sanskrit soma. This perpetuates a rite which must be at least 5000 years old. Finally he read the household lists, evoking blessings by name on all the village. Then numbers of the villagers came forward to receive some of the parahaoma, which they believed would give them renewed health and strength to live the good life in the year to come. They took away then half their family's offerings, now blessed, to be shared at home in festive gatherings. The other half was partly given to the poor, partly eaten in community by a congregation of all the men of the village, gathered that evening at the fire temple.

These seven festivals, joyfully and eagerly kept by the villagers, were thus a great strengthening of their religious lives. Other observances which also reminded them of basic doctrines were those concerned with death. There were many of these; but

emotionally and doctrinally the most significant was the short service held before dawn on the fourth day. Zoroastrians believe that the soul lingers on earth for three days after death, and then ascends as the sun rises on the fourth day to face judgment for its life on earth, and be consigned to heaven or hell. So friends and relatives gather with the priest before sunrise to pray for the soul; and as the rim of the sun appears over the mountains they fall silent, and accompany the invisible spirit with their thoughts up into the sky and into the world beyond. It was always a dramatic moment, and undoubtedly everyone reflected then that one day his own soul would travel the same path. And there is no question but that the thought of that judgment day to come was a powerful force in stiffening moral resolve in the face of worldly temptations.

Orthodox Zoroastrians hold that there are three ways to serve God: worship, and leading a morally good life, are two of them, and the third is to keep the laws of purity. These for a Zoroastrian are based on dualistic concepts, and respect for the seven creations; and they have been elaborated down the millennia into an all-embracing code. The Shi'i Moslems of Yazd also have a strict but different purity code, and this has raised a rigid barrier between the two communities. The Moslems call the Zoroastrians unclean infidels, the Zoroastrians name the Moslems impure barbarians; and the orthodox of the two faiths will not eat or drink with one another, or come into physical contact. This was the religious justification for segre-

gating the Zoroastrians, and forbidding them to engage in activities which would bring them among Moslems.

Among the Zoroastrians themselves the greatest source of impurity is death, because doctrinally death belongs to God's Adversary, the Devil, and was brought into the world by him. So to touch anything dead, even an insect, makes one impure. Such small impurities can be dealt with simply by washing, first with a disinfectant and then with water; but to touch a dead person is a heavy contamination and needs elaborate cleansing. Nevertheless, even when they can afford it, Zoroastrians never employ unbelievers to dispose of their dead, because only Zoroastrians, they hold, will take proper precautions to prevent a corpse polluting the creations. So Sharifabad had two corpse-bearers, and two women appointed to lay out the dead; and because of their work they had to keep somewhat apart from the rest. Even in their own homes they had their own cups and dishes, ate from a separate cloth, and never put fuel on the hearth fire or lit a lamp. Nor did they work in the fields, so as not to pollute the good earth. They had to live, that is, as if they suffered from an infectious disease, which they must avoid giving to others. But inevitably ordinary people too sometimes touched a corpse. Most villagers died in their own homes, and until recently infant mortality was heavy. So an ancient rite was still administered to cleanse away this worst of pollutions, and this was undergone periodically by the corpse-bearers too, to prevent contamination accumulating in their persons.

This rite was called the 'purification of the nine nights,' and it was elaborate and relatively costly. For the initial purification the polluted person entered a special enclosure in which there were nine sets of stones; and he had to cleanse himself by applying disinfectant, dry sand and then pure water to his whole body a prescribed number of times while moving from one set of stones to the next, the pollution growing steadily less with each step. All the while the priest would be steadily chanting Avesta. After the ninefold triple cleansing was over, the candidate had to go into retreat, under strict rules, for nine days and nights, during which there were three simpler ablutions, and a frequent recital of prayers. The regulations for the whole observance are laid down in one of the books of the Avesta, and must be many hundred years old.

In Sharifabad the practice was to administer this great purification only once a year, in the period just before the religious Nō Rūz, so that everyone who needed it could begin the new year 'clean' again. So a whole group, men and women, would undergo the cleansing one after the other, and spend the retreat together; and in spite of the strict discipline, the quiet hours were cheerfully spent, with much pleasant talk of old times and ways. In earlier days, when there were hundreds of priests, the purification was administered at need; and the drawback to giving it only once a year was that a person who had to wait to cleanse himself from a serious pollution could not meantime enter a fire-temple or take part in religious services; and if during the

time of waiting a gahāmbār were celebrated at the family home, he would simply have to quit his own roof for that day. Discipline in such matters depended naturally much on the individual; but so deeply was the instinct developed for purity and impurity that the rules seemed in general to be scrupulously observed.

Sharifabad in the 1960's formed part of a single parish with two other oasis villages; and the one overworked priest could not do much more than perform the basic rites and ceremonies for his scattered flock. None of the villagers themselves understood the language of their holy book, the Avesta, though all knew passages from it by heart; and they maintained the teachings of their prophet as heirs to a living tradition, handed down from generation to generation. There is no reason to suppose, despite the assumptions of some Western scholars, that there has ever been a break in this tradition; and so in Sharifabad one could see the flowering of a faith which had first been preached, it seems, in a pre-literate Stone Age, and which was still carried on loyally without benefit of books.

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